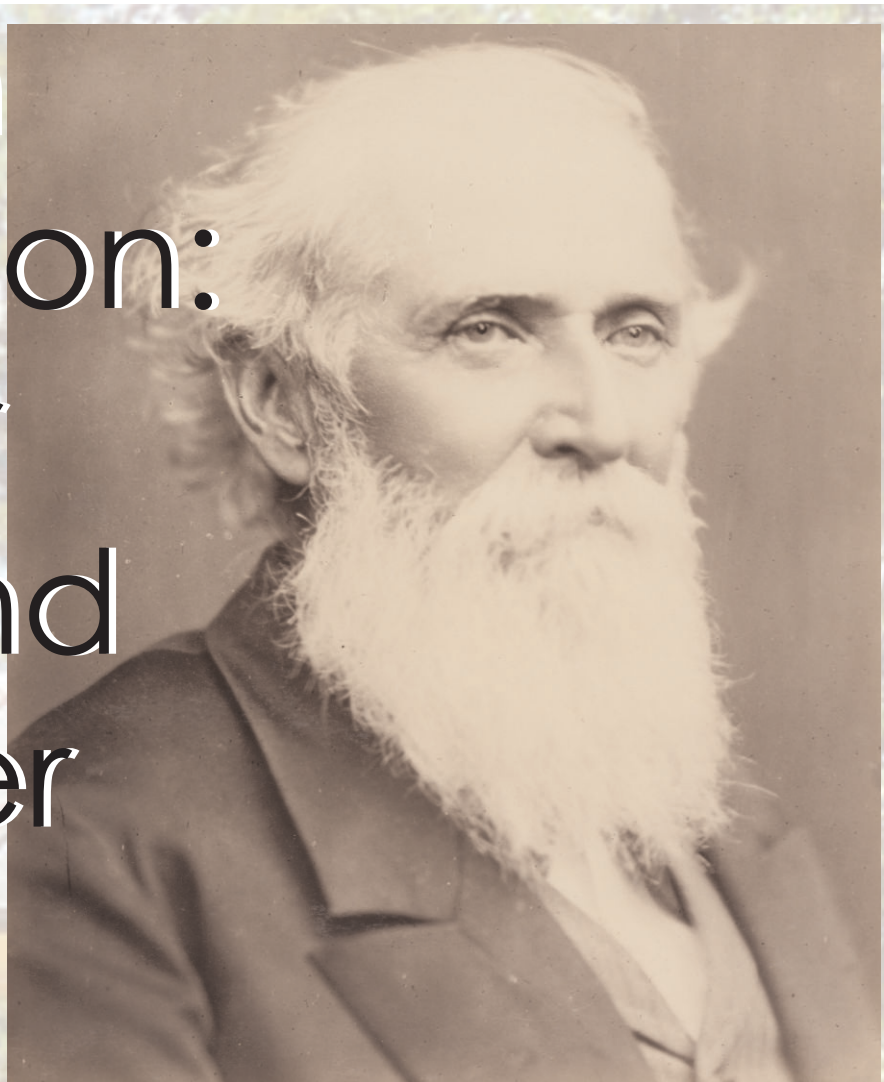


# Sir John Robertson: Premier and land reformer



**S**ir John Robertson, after whom Orange's Robertson Park is named, was born in 1816 at Bow, London. On the advice of his friend Governor Sir Thomas Brisbane, Robertson's father, James, decided to emigrate to NSW. The family arrived in Sydney in 1822.

In 1833 Robertson worked his passage to England, returning to Australia via South America in 1835.

He joined his father on his property at Jerry's Plains in the upper Hunter Valley, gained experience as a station manager, and also explored the north-west of NSW.

He became aware of the problems facing squatters but also understood that they, perhaps unfairly, had the use of community land.

In 1839 he married Margaret Davies and settled down as a wheat farmer.

Robertson was keen to see responsible government for NSW, rejecting the power of the Governor and the interference of the British Government. He wanted to see government based on equal electorates and a democratic franchise. While he supported squatters against Governor Gipps' regulations (Gipps wanted to restrict the expansion of grazing in north-western NSW to protect the Aborigines against dispossession and massacre), he felt their claims to security of tenure and other privileges were unfair.

Robertson was elected to the Legislative Assembly for the Liberal Party when responsible government was established in 1856, and started campaigning for land reform. The public push for land reform was, however, as much against the privileges and power of the squatters as it was about 'unlocking the lands'. It was also an attempt by the middle class professionals and traders in

country towns to have the land populated by smallholders who would be more likely to spend their money in country centres than the squatters, whose wool clip was sent directly to Sydney and who then bought their goods there.

Robertson became Minister for Lands and Public Works in 1858. He became Premier in 1860 and started working on land reforms, the Crown Lands Alienation Bill and the Crown Lands Occupation Bill, but the Bills were defeated. He fought an election on the issue and emerged triumphant.

Robertson later resigned as Premier and, as Secretary for Lands, concentrated on land bills. While he was faced with concerted opposition to the Bills, they were eventually passed in 1861.

Robertson survived stormy parliamentary and business careers. He was premier five times: from 1860-61; 1868-70; 1875-77; again in 1877; and 1885-1886. He died in 1891.

## Remembering Robertson

Besides Orange's Robertson Park, Sir John Robertson's name lives on in the Federal electoral division of Robertson, the former State electoral district of Robertson, and the NSW Southern Highlands town of Robertson. A statue to his memory can be seen in the Sydney Botanical Gardens.